

CHAPTER 8.

The following day was a Thursday and on Thursdays, as has been stated, Belpher Castle was thrown open to the general public between the hours of two and four. It was a tradition of long standing, this periodical lowering of the barriers, and had always been faithfully observed by Lord Marshmoreton ever since his accession to the title. By the permanent occupants of the castle the day was regarded with mixed feelings. Lord Belpher, while approving of it in theory, as he did of all the family traditions--for he was a great supporter of all things feudal, and took his position as one of the hereditary aristocracy of Great Britain extremely seriously--heartily disliked it in practice. More than once he had been obliged to exit hastily by a further door in order to keep from being discovered by a drove of tourists intent on inspecting the library or the great drawing-room; and now it was his custom to retire to his bedroom immediately after lunch and not to emerge until the tide of invasion had ebbed away.

Keggs, the butler, always looked forward to Thursdays with pleasurable anticipation. He enjoyed the sense of authority which it gave him to herd these poor outcasts to and fro among the surroundings which were an every-day commonplace to himself. Also he liked hearing the sound of his own voice as it lectured in rolling periods on the objects of interest by the way-side. But even to Keggs there was a bitter mixed with the sweet. No one was

better aware than himself that the nobility of his manner, excellent as a means of impressing the mob, worked against him when it came to a question of tips. Again and again had he been harrowed by the spectacle of tourists, huddled together like sheep, debating among themselves in nervous whispers as to whether they could offer this personage anything so contemptible as half a crown for himself and deciding that such an insult was out of the question. It was his endeavour, especially towards the end of the proceedings, to cultivate a manner blending a dignity fitting his position with a sunny geniality which would allay the timid doubts of the tourist and indicate to him that, bizarre as the idea might seem, there was nothing to prevent him placing his poor silver in more worthy hands.

Possibly the only member of the castle community who was absolutely indifferent to these public visits was Lord Marshmoreton. He made no difference between Thursday and any other day. Precisely as usual he donned his stained corduroys and pottered about his beloved garden; and when, as happened on an average once a quarter, some visitor, strayed from the main herd, came upon him as he worked and mistook him for one of the gardeners, he accepted the error without any attempt at explanation, sometimes going so far as to encourage it by adopting a rustic accent in keeping with his appearance. This sort of thing tickled the simple-minded peer.

George joined the procession punctually at two o'clock, just as

Keggs was clearing his throat preparatory to saying, "We are now in the main 'all, and before going any further I would like to call your attention to Sir Peter Lely's portrait of--" It was his custom to begin his Thursday lectures with this remark, but today it was postponed; for, no sooner had George appeared, than a breezy voice on the outskirts of the throng spoke in a tone that made competition impossible.

"For goodness' sake, George."

And Billie Dore detached herself from the group, a trim vision in blue. She wore a dust-coat and a motor veil, and her eyes and cheeks were glowing from the fresh air.

"For goodness' sake, George, what are you doing here?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing."

"Oh, I motored down with a boy I know. We had a breakdown just outside the gates. We were on our way to Brighton for lunch. He suggested I should pass the time seeing the sights while he fixed up the sprockets or the differential gear or whatever it was. He's coming to pick me up when he's through. But, on the level, George, how do you get this way? You sneak out of town and leave the show flat, and nobody has a notion where you are. Why, we were thinking of advertising for you, or going to the police or something. For

all anybody knew, you might have been sandbagged or dropped in the river."

This aspect of the matter had not occurred to George till now. His sudden descent on Belfer had seemed to him the only natural course to pursue. He had not realized that he would be missed, and that his absence might have caused grave inconvenience to a large number of people.

"I never thought of that. I--well, I just happened to come here."

"You aren't living in this old castle?"

"Not quite. I've a cottage down the road. I wanted a few days in the country so I rented it."

"But what made you choose this place?"

Keggs, who had been regarding these disturbers of the peace with dignified disapproval, coughed.

"If you would not mind, madam. We are waiting."

"Eh? How's that?" Miss Dore looked up with a bright smile. "I'm sorry. Come along, George. Get in the game." She nodded cheerfully to the butler. "All right. All set now. You may fire when ready,

Gridley."

Keggs bowed austerely, and cleared his throat again.

"We are now in the main 'all, and before going any further I would like to call your attention to Sir Peter Lely's portrait of the fifth countess. Said by experts to be in his best manner."

There was an almost soundless murmur from the mob, expressive of wonder and awe, like a gentle breeze rustling leaves. Billie Dore resumed her conversation in a whisper.

"Yes, there was an awful lot of excitement when they found that you had disappeared. They were phoning the Carlton every ten minutes trying to get you. You see, the summertime number flopped on the second night, and they hadn't anything to put in its place. But it's all right. They took it out and sewed up the wound, and now you'd never know there had been anything wrong. The show was ten minutes too long, anyway."

"How's the show going?"

"It's a riot. They think it will run two years in London. As far as I can make it out you don't call it a success in London unless you can take your grandchildren to see the thousandth night."

"That's splendid. And how is everybody? All right?"

"Fine. That fellow Gray is still hanging round Babe. It beats me what she sees in him. Anybody but an infant could see the man wasn't on the level. Well, I don't blame you for quitting London, George. This sort of thing is worth fifty Londons."

The procession had reached one of the upper rooms, and they were looking down from a window that commanded a sweep of miles of the countryside, rolling and green and wooded. Far away beyond the last covert Belpher Bay gleamed like a streak of silver. Billie Dore gave a little sigh.

"There's nothing like this in the world. I'd like to stand here for the rest of my life, just lapping it up."

"I will call your attention," boomed Keggs at their elbow, "to this window, known in the fem'ly trediton as Leonard's Leap. It was in the year seventeen 'undred and eighty-seven that Lord Leonard Forth, eldest son of 'Is Grace the Dook of Lochlane, 'urled 'imself out of this window in order to avoid compromising the beautiful Countess of Marshmoreton, with oom 'e is related to 'ave 'ad a ninnocent romance. Surprised at an advanced hour by 'is lordship the earl in 'er ladyship's boudoir, as this room then was, 'e leaped through the open window into the boughs of the cedar tree which stands below, and was fortunate enough to escape with a few

'armless contusions."

A murmur of admiration greeted the recital of the ready tact of this eighteenth-century Steve Brodie.

"There," said Billie enthusiastically, "that's exactly what I mean about this country. It's just a mass of Leonard's Leaps and things. I'd like to settle down in this sort of place and spend the rest of my life milking cows and taking forkfuls of soup to the deserving villagers."

"We will now," said Keggs, herding the mob with a gesture, "proceed to the Amber Drawing-Room, containing some Gobelin Tapestries 'ighly spoken of by connoozers."

The obedient mob began to drift out in his wake.

"What do you say, George," asked Billie in an undertone, "if we side-step the Amber Drawing-Room? I'm wild to get into that garden. There's a man working among those roses. Maybe he would show us round."

George followed her pointing finger. Just below them a sturdy, brown-faced man in corduroys was pausing to light a stubby pipe.

"Just as you like."

They made their way down the great staircase. The voice of Keggs, saying complimentary things about the Gobelin Tapestry, came to their ears like the roll of distant drums. They wandered out towards the rose-garden. The man in corduroys had lit his pipe and was bending once more to his task.

"Well, dadda," said Billie amiably, "how are the crops?"

The man straightened himself. He was a nice-looking man of middle age, with the kind eyes of a friendly dog. He smiled genially, and started to put his pipe away.

Billie stopped him.

"Don't stop smoking on my account," she said. "I like it. Well, you've got the right sort of a job, haven't you! If I was a man, there's nothing I'd like better than to put in my eight hours in a rose-garden." She looked about her. "And this," she said with approval, "is just what a rose-garden ought to be."

"Are you fond of roses--missy?"

"You bet I am! You must have every kind here that was ever invented. All the fifty-seven varieties."

"There are nearly three thousand varieties," said the man in corduroys tolerantly.

"I was speaking colloquially, dad. You can't teach me anything about roses. I'm the guy that invented them. Got any Ayrshires?"

The man in corduroys seemed to have come to the conclusion that Billie was the only thing on earth that mattered. This revelation of a kindred spirit had captured him completely. George was merely among those present.

"Those--them--over there are Ayrshires, missy."

"We don't get Ayrshires in America. At least, I never ran across them. I suppose they do have them."

"You want the right soil."

"Clay and lots of rain."

"You're right."

There was an earnest expression on Billie Dore's face that George had never seen there before.

"Say, listen, dad, in this matter of rose-beetles, what would you

do if--"

George moved away. The conversation was becoming too technical for him, and he had an idea that he would not be missed. There had come to him, moreover, in a flash one of those sudden inspirations which great generals get. He had visited the castle this afternoon without any settled plan other than a vague hope that he might somehow see Maud. He now perceived that there was no chance of doing this. Evidently, on Thursdays, the family went to earth and remained hidden until the sightseers had gone. But there was another avenue of communication open to him. This gardener seemed an exceptionally intelligent man. He could be trusted to deliver a note to Maud.

In his late rambles about Belper Castle in the company of Keggs and his followers, George had been privileged to inspect the library. It was an easily accessible room, opening off the main hall. He left Billie and her new friend deep in a discussion of slugs and plant-lice, and walked quickly back to the house. The library was unoccupied.

George was a thorough young man. He believed in leaving nothing to chance. The gardener had seemed a trustworthy soul, but you never knew. It was possible that he drank. He might forget or lose the precious note. So, with a wary eye on the door, George hastily scribbled it in duplicate. This took him but a few minutes. He went

out into the garden again to find Billie Dore on the point of stepping into a blue automobile.

"Oh, there you are, George. I wondered where you had got to. Say, I made quite a hit with dad. I've given him my address, and he's promised to send me a whole lot of roses. By the way, shake hands with Mr. Forsyth. This is George Bevan, Freddie, who wrote the music of our show."

The solemn youth at the wheel extended a hand.

"Topping show. Topping music. Topping all round."

"Well, good-bye, George. See you soon, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. Give my love to everybody."

"All right. Let her rip, Freddie. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

The blue car gathered speed and vanished down the drive. George returned to the man in corduroys, who had bent himself double in pursuit of a slug.

"Just a minute," said George hurriedly. He pulled out the first of

the notes. "Give this to Lady Maud the first chance you get. It's important. Here's a sovereign for your trouble."

He hastened away. He noticed that gratification had turned the other nearly purple in the face, and was anxious to leave him. He was a modest young man, and effusive thanks always embarrassed him.

There now remained the disposal of the duplicate note. It was hardly worth while, perhaps, taking such a precaution, but George knew that victories are won by those who take no chances. He had wandered perhaps a hundred yards from the rose-garden when he encountered a small boy in the many-buttoned uniform of a page. The boy had appeared from behind a big cedar, where, as a matter of fact, he had been smoking a stolen cigarette.

"Do you want to earn half a crown?" asked George.

The market value of messengers had slumped.

The stripling held his hand out.

"Give this note to Lady Maud."

"Right ho!"

"See that it reaches her at once."

George walked off with the consciousness of a good day's work done. Albert the page, having bitten his half-crown, placed it in his pocket. Then he hurried away, a look of excitement and gratification in his deep blue eyes.